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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet summarizes the results of a national survey funded by the U.S. Department of Education which asked Americans how they perceived the role of the public library in their lives. Those surveyed included a cross section of the national population, minority groups, and community opinion leaders. Most of those surveyed regard public libraries as a very important source of support for their community's educational aspirations. The lower the education and income level of the public, the higher they rate the educational importance of their public library. The roles rated "very important" by at least 50 percent of the sample were: educational support center for students of all ages (88 percent); learning center for adult independent learners (85 percent); discovery and learning center for preschool children (83 percent); research center for scholars and researchers (68 percent); center for community information (66 percent); information center for community business (55 percent); comfortable, quiet place to read, think, or work (52 percent); and recreational reading center of popular materials (51 percent). (JLB)

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Public Libraries Serving Communities

Education Is Job #1

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Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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U.S. Department of Education
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March 1994

Libraries are fundamental to the American educational experience. . . . Libraries can be dynamic learning centers for everyone and contribute to helping the nation's communities achieve the National Education Goals.

Sharon P. Robinson

National Education Goals

In stressing quality education from early childhood through lifelong learning, the President and the Governors adopted the National Education Goals. The Goals state that by the year 2000:

1. All American children will start school ready to learn;
2. At least 90 percent of our students will graduate from high school;
3. Our students will demonstrate competency in challenging subject matter and will learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment;
4. American students will be first in the world in science and mathematics achievement;
5. Every adult will be literate and have the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a world economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship; and
6. Every school will be safe and drug free and offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.

For more information about the National Education Goals, call 1–800–USA–LEARN.

Public Libraries Serving Communities

Education Is Job #1

How Americans perceive the role of the public library in their lives was the topic of a recent national survey funded by the U.S. Department of Education and conducted by the University of Minnesota and the Gallup Organization. Those surveyed included:

- A cross section of the national population,
- Minority groups, and
- Community opinion leaders.

The results were clear: Most of those surveyed, especially blacks and Hispanics, regard public libraries as a very important source of support for their community's educational aspirations. Also, the lower the education and income level of the public, the higher they rate the educational importance of their public library.

Survey Findings

A national sample of the general public was asked to evaluate the importance to their communities of the major roles of the public library. Those roles rated "very important" by at least 50 percent of the sample were (in ranked order):

- Educational support center for students of all ages (88 percent);
- Learning center for adult independent learners (85 percent);
- Discovery and learning center for preschool children (83 percent);
- Research center for scholars and researchers (68 percent);
- Center for community information (66 percent);
- Information center for community business (55 percent);
- Comfortable, quiet place to read, think, or work (52 percent); and
- Recreational reading center of popular materials (51 percent).

Comparisons were made among respondents with different household incomes and among respondents based on highest grade level achieved. Findings revealed that those with household incomes below $15,000 (see table 1) and those with an eighth-grade education or less (see table 2) rated the educational roles of the library (the first three items in the above list) as "very important" more often than did those with incomes of $60,000 or more or those who had completed college.

Table 1.—Top-ranked roles of the public library in society: Comparisons among general public respondents with different annual household incomes

Roles	Less than $15,000	$15,000-$29,999	$30,000-$44,999	$45,000-$59,999	$60,000 or more
	Percentage				
1. Educational support center for students of all ages	88.3	90.2	92.7	94.1	82.8
2. Discovery and learning center for preschool children	90.4	85.5	84.5	82.9	76.4
3. Learning center for adult independent learners	93.3	87.1	84.2	82.5	79.2

SOURCE: *The Roles of the Public Library in Society—The Results of a National Survey: Final Report,* by George D'Elia, in collaboration with the University of Minnescta Center for Survey Research and the Gallup Organization (July 1993).

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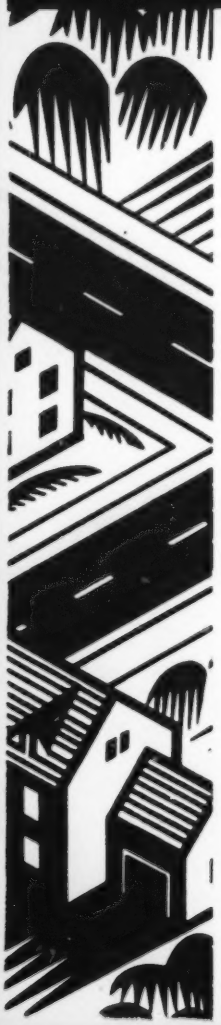
Table 2.—Top-ranked roles of the public library in society: Comparisons among general public respondents based on highest grade level achieved

Roles	8th grade or less	9th-11th grade	12th grade	Some college	Completed college
	Percentage				
1. Educational support center for students of all ages	89.8	74.2	89.4	94.5	88.2
2. Discovery and learning center for preschool children	91.7	83.4	84.6	86.6	78.8
3. Learning center for adult independent learners	92.3	88.2	86.8	83.5	80.3

SOURCE: *The Roles of the Public Library in Society—The Results of a National Survey: Final Report*, by George D'Elia, in collaboration with the University of Minnesota Center for Survey Research and the Gallup Organization (July 1993).



Subsequent national surveys of blacks and Hispanics, when combined with the general public poll, enabled comparative analyses of opinions. The results of these comparisons indicated that:

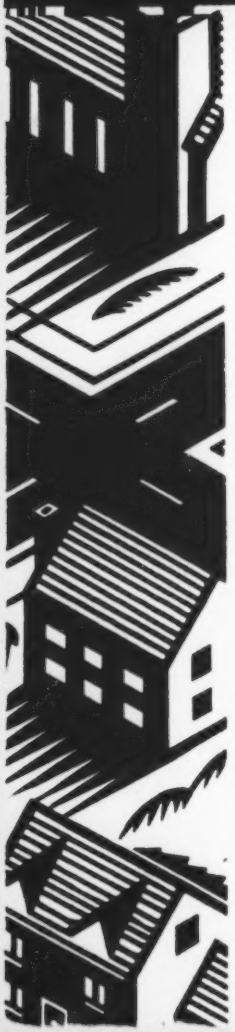
- Among all racial-ethnic groups, the highest percentages of "very important" responses occurred for the three educational roles of the public library: an educational support center for students of all ages; a learning center for adult independent learners; and a discovery and learning center for preschool children.
- Blacks and Hispanics systematically evaluated the importance of each of the roles of the public library to the community more highly than did whites.

Table 3 presents findings from all groups surveyed: the general public, blacks, whites, Hispanics, and community opinion leaders.

Table 3.— Roles of the public library in society as ranked in survey

Roles	Opinion leaders	General public	Blacks	Whites	Hispanics
			Percentage		
1. Educational support center for students of all ages	88.0	88.1	96.5	88.6	93.8
2. Discovery and learning center for preschool children	81.3	83.2	95.7	83.4	93.0
3. Learning center for adult independent learners	78.0	84.6	93.1	84.7	95.4
4. Center for information about the community	65.0	65.6	85.6	65.1	85.3
5. Research center for scholars and researchers	55.7	68.2	84.6	67.5	84.2
6. Recreational reading center of popular materials	52.7	51.4	61.5	52.3	57.4
7. Information center for community businesses	47.0	55.1	78.9	54.8	72.7
8. Comfortable, quiet place to read, think, or work	38.3	52.4	70.7	51.7	74.9
9. Community activities center	46.0	41.3	63.8	41.0	61.5
10. General information center for community residents	38.0	48.4	74.8	47.8	61.1

SOURCE: *The Roles of the Public Library in Society—The Results of a National Survey: Final Report*, by George D'Elia, in collaboration with the University of Minnesota Center for Survey Research and the Gallup Organization (July 1993).



More About Who Was Surveyed

The survey population was limited to adults aged 18 years or older who could be reached by telephone. Samples for the surveys included the following:

- A national probability sample (N = 1,001) representing a cross section of the national population;
- A national probability sample (N = 846) of whites who were the same respondents as those whites who were obtained in the national probability sample;
- A national probability sample of blacks (N = 401) which included 79 blacks who were obtained in the national probability sample plus an additional 322 blacks who were obtained from a supplemental national probability sample of blacks;
- A national probability sample of Hispanics (N = 399) which included 41 Hispanics who were obtained in the national probability sample plus an additional 358 Hispanics who were obtained from a supplemental national probability sample of Hispanics; and

*Since the number of blacks and Hispanics that would be surveyed by means of a national probability sample would be too few for cross group comparisons and too few for generalizations to the black and Hispanic populations, supplemental samples of blacks and Hispanics were obtained.

- A sample of community opinion leaders (N = 300) who were defined as individuals who, because of the positions they hold in the community, have an influence on the shaping of public opinion. For this survey, opinion leaders were defined as *media leaders* (e.g., newspaper editors and editorial writers, TV and radio news directors), *political leaders* (e.g., elected or appointed public officials), *business and civic leaders* (e.g., executives and administrators from for-profit and nonprofit organizations and associations), and *educational leaders* (e.g., administrators and officers from primary and secondary schools and institutions of higher learning).

For Further Information

A complete description of the survey and its findings can be found in *The Roles of the Public Library in Society—The Results of a National Survey: Final Report.* Released in July 1993, the report was prepared by George D'Elia, Information & Decision Sciences Department, Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota, in collaboration with the University of Minnesota Center for Survey Research and the Gallup Organization. Copies of the report are available from:

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A copy of the Executive Summary of the report is available on Internet. To reach the U.S. Department of Education/OERI Gopher Server, point to <gopher.ed.gov>, and follow this menu path:

4. Educational Research, Improvement, and Statistics (OERI & NCES)
11. Library Programs
7. Roles of the Public Library in Society (Exec. Summary)

The study on the roles of the public library in society was funded by a grant made under the Library Research and Demonstration Program, Title II–B of the Higher Education Act. The program is administered by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Library Programs.

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